

The cold weather did not deter members of Appleby Archaeology from attending an informative talk on the Turnpikes and Milestones of Cumbria. Colin Smith, the Cumbrian representative for the Milestone Society, outlined the history of roads in Cumbria before speaking in detail on turnpikes and milestones found in the local area.

The Romans were the first road builders in Cumbria and there is evidence of these roads throughout the county. The A66 follows the course of the Roman road across Stainmore. It continued westwards to Troutbeck but the only reason it did so may have been to keep the garrison at Troutbeck occupied. Milestones were erected but few remain. One can be seen in situ east of Temple Sowerby but sadly the inscription has been eroded.

Wheeled traffic was uncommon in Cumbria until the late 16th century. The main method of transport in the west was by sea where Whitehaven and Maryport were important trade centres. People travelled by foot or on horses, the roads being no more than tracks. Any transportation, away from the ports and rivers, was done by pack horses. One example given was of a Kendal man transporting fifty tons of machinery by pack horses from Glasgow to a snuff mill on the River Kent.

An Act of Parliament in 1555 made it the responsibility of every parish to elect an unpaid “Overseer of Highways” to survey its roads and see that repairs were done by the parishioners. From 1663, by acts of Parliament, the maintenance of roads, in some regions became the responsibility of local magistrates. In 1691 minimum standards were introduced. For example roads leading to market towns had to be “even level and at least eight feet wide”. Not a great deal was done.

In 1706 the first Turnpike Act was passed. This enabled groups of people to form Turnpike Trusts and through them apply to Parliament to build new or improve old roads and to charge those who wished to use them. The groups were usually landowners, traders and farmers. Each trustee had to have either an income of £60 a year or own an estate worth £1500 and no licensed traders could be trustees. Turnpike Trusts had to be renewed every twenty one years.

The route of a road was specified by law and the trustees had to have a system of barriers, turnpikes, where the tolls could be collected. One of the first turnpike roads in Cumbria, authorised by an Act of Parliament in 1752, was the road from Kendal to Keighley, which was then part of the main road to London.

Turnpikes often had toll houses built alongside them. Toll houses were usually let by public auction by the Turnpike Trust to the highest bidder. Those who were appointed as "pike keepers" had the right to live in the house and collect the tolls. Many of the toll houses, have been converted into modern dwellings, but can still be seen across the county. In the Appleby area there is one at Coupland Beck and another near Hoff.

Charges varied depending on the traffic. Tolls for carts and carriages were based on the number of horses employed. There was resistance to paying tolls and there were some exceptions. These included farmers taking manure to their fields or cows for milking, people attending church or a funeral, the army and mail coaches. Tolls were closed at night except for the mail coach when the toll keeper had to get up to let it through.

From 1750 to 1770, a period known as Turnpike Mania, 1500 miles of road were built and 400 Turnpike Trusts were set up.

In the 19th century the population and industrial activity increased and improvements to wagons and carriages meant they could travel faster. The arrival of the railways and tourism further increased traffic and the roads suffered damage. In 1888 the Turnpike Trusts could no longer maintain the roads and the responsibility was taken on by the County Councils.

At first trustees could decide for themselves whether they marked the road with milestones but later Turnpike Acts, after 1760, made it obligatory to erect milestones, one every mile and it was also a criminal offence to damage them.

Cumbria has a rich legacy of milestones with over 300 remaining. However many are in a poor state of repair and many more have been lost through damage and neglect. Legally the Highways Authority owns the stones and has a duty to maintain them. They are a valuable artefacts from our industrial past, but sadly a number of milestones are being lost every year and 90% of the existing milestones are neglected.

A series of beautiful slides of the different styles of Cumbrian milestones were shown. The milestones were in all conditions with some freshly-painted and well cared whilst others were badly damaged and neglected.

Across the county there was a variety of shapes and sizes of stones, with some weighing up to 200 kilograms, but for any given stretch of road there was a requirement that the stones should be similar and form a series. If a different style stone is identified on a stretch of road it indicates that the road has been altered. This alteration was often to level a road. The early stones had the place names and distances painted on them. Later stones had cast iron plaques attached bearing the names and distances. These plaques can weigh up to 8 kilograms. Different stone was used depending on the locality but many were made of sandstone and these are easily damaged for example by mechanical hedge cutting.

Colin recounted stories of his experiences trying to locate milestones and concluded by giving suggestions as to how they might be preserved. These included undertaking regular surveys, ensuring the milestones and markers can be seen and appreciated, and if one is found, recording details of what the milestone is made of, its dimensions, exact location, condition and any text found on the stone. This information can then be forwarded to Colin who will investigate and record the information on a data base which is being compiled by the Milestone Society in collaboration with English Heritage.

A number of members asked questions about stones that they knew of and they were encouraged to let Colin have details. He was then thanked for an interesting and enjoyable evening.